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**Rezension von: Layh, Susanna: Finstere neue Welten :  
gattungsparadigmatische Transformationen der literarischen Utopie und  
Dystopie. Würzburg 2014**

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Most of the essays in *Plant Horror* deal with recent and contemporary works (ranging from the mid-twentieth-century to the present). However, chapters by Agnes Scherer, Angela Tenga, and Keridiana W. Chez remind us of the medieval and early modern roots of our contemporary fears of plant independence. There are also some prominent texts that recur in these essays again and again: most notably, John Wyndham's 1951 novel *Day of the Triffids* (and its 1962 film version). A number of essays are also concerned with the several versions of *Little Shop of Horrors* (originally filmed by Roger Corman in 1960, but remade later as a musical, which then became a film in its own right). And there are also several discussions of *The Ruins* (a 2006 novel by Scott Smith, made into a film in 2008) and *The Happening* (a film by M. Night Shyamalan, 2008). The volume thus suggests the existence of something like a canon of plant horror. Any such canon would of course also have to include works that are treated only in single essays, like Jan Svankmajer's great 2000 film *Otesanek* (discussed by Elizabeth Parker), and Ward Moore's 1947 novel *Greener Than You Think* (analysed by Jill E. Anderson). There are also crucial works that the volume only mentions in passing—like Algernon Blackwood's 1907 short story "The Willows." But all in all, *Plant Horror* both covers its field in detail, and offers a wide variety of approaches that promise to bear fruit in future scholarship.

STEVEN SHAVIRO

Layh, Susanna. *Finstere neue Welten: Gattungsparadigmatische Transformationen der literarischen Utopie und Dystopie* [Dark New Worlds. Paradigmatic Genre Transformations in Literary Utopias and Dystopias]. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2014. 320 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-3826053696. EUR 48.00.

A typical PhD thesis written at a German university differs quite considerably from one written at an English-speaking institution. One obvious difference is the emphasis on theory. While English-speaking scholars generally prefer a pragmatic hands-on approach, their German-speaking colleagues are much more prone to theorizing and recapitulating previous research. One hundred or more pages of conceptual preliminaries are not unusual for a German PhD thesis. At worst, this leads to a dry and uninspiring book that forces readers to surrender before they even pass the theoretical prologue. At best, the result is a concise summary of a field's current state of the art.

In the field of utopian studies, Thomas Schölderle's *Utopia und Utopie* (2011; *Utopia and the Genre of Utopia*) was a seminal example for the latter. This work is a sweeping recapitulation and condensation of decades of previous research that resulted in a convincing and useful model for literary utopias. Susanna Layh's *Finstere neue Welten*, which was written almost simultaneously but took longer to get published, is in many ways the ideal companion to *Utopia und Utopie*. Almost as comprehensive as Schölderle's study, it has a different, complementary focus. While Schölderle concentrates on the classic positive utopia—the *eu-topia*—and on German-speaking political science, Layh, who studied comparative literature at the University of Augsburg, is primarily interested in dystopian literature. In addition, her horizon is distinctly international, in terms of the primary and secondary literature she works with.

Layh's aim is to "depict various processes of transformation specific to the genre which utopian literature undergoes during the 20th century" (25; my translations throughout). The focus on literature after 1900 is no surprise, since the tradition of the positive utopia more or less came to an end in the late 19th century; Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) and Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) can be regarded as the genre's last two great achievements. The dystopian novel, on the other hand, is distinctly an invention of the 20th century.

Layh's book is divided into two main parts. In the first, called "Transformation of the Utopian," the author sketches out her understanding of utopia and gives an overview of the genre's development. Following the lead of literary scholars like Hans Ulrich Seeber and Wilhelm Voßkamp, Layh understands utopias first and foremost as a literary genre, with More's *Utopia* (1516) as a founding text. *Utopia*, as most scholars agree today, was not meant as a blueprint for political action but rather presents a complex mixture of social criti-

cism, estranging funhouse mirror, and satire. Accordingly, Layh sees utopian novels not so much as activist texts, but primarily as “ideal counter images” (38) that—explicitly or implicitly—criticize the status quo. As a consequence, she puts an emphasis on “the interplay of form and utopian intention” (40), on the “narrative and literary modes of representation” (ibid.) employed by utopian texts.

With her understanding of the genre established, Layh then describes three distinct developments after 1900 in reaction to the perceived shortcomings of the classical model: the advent of the critical utopia, the feminist utopia, and the anti-utopia. The critical utopia, a term coined by Tom Moylan in his influential *Demand the Impossible* (1986), is a reaction to the shortcomings of the classic model. The sf novels of the 1970s analyzed by Moylan are more positive in their outlook than the preceding dystopias but refuse the classic utopia’s totalizing and totalitarian attitude.

The second paradigm shift Layh traces and another focus of her analysis is the “entry of women into the history of literature” (66). According to her, “the vast majority of contemporary literary utopias/dystopias is written by feminist female writers” (22). Layh emphasizes that this is not a completely new phenomenon. Utopias written by women have a rich history, but for a long time this tradition has been suppressed. It only became more visible with novels like Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915) and its less well known successor *With Her in Ourland* (1916). As Layh shows in her analysis of Gilman’s novels and Mary E. Bradley Lane’s *Mizora: A Prophecy* (1880/81), these texts, while being pioneers in their time, are not unproblematic today since they celebrate an allegedly natural—and a very traditional—concept of motherhood.

When it comes to the question of anti-utopias, Layh sharply distinguishes them from dystopias. While dystopias like *We* (1921) or *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) “prolongate contemporary events, developments, and tendencies into a fictional draft of a society which is even worse than the extra fictional contemporary society” (112-13), anti-utopias are targeted “towards a specific literary or historic utopia or against utopianism per se” (114). Dystopias are the result of the genre’s “inner literary self-criticism” (115); anti-utopias, on the other hand, stem from an extra-literary rejection of utopian ideas.

Layh’s distinctions and the genealogy she draws up are not entirely new but conform more or less to the current orthodoxy. Still, reading this first part of her study is highly rewarding. Layh knows the relevant discussions and develops her concepts plausibly and in a clear style. What makes *Finstere Welten* especially worthwhile are the detailed analyses she uses to illustrate the theoretical concepts. Here, she leaves the beaten path and comes up with many examples that have hardly—or not at all—been covered by previous scholars. *Waslala: Memorial del Futuro* (1996; *Waslala: Memorial of the Future*) by Nicaraguan writer Gioconda Belli serves for the concept of the

critical utopia, while Jorge Luis Borges’ *Utopia de un hombre que está cansado* (1975; *Utopia of a Tired Man*) and *Ich werde hier sein im Sonnenschein und im Schatten* (2008) by Swiss author Christian Kracht are used as examples of anti-utopias.

The second part, called “Transformations of Dystopia,” proceeds accordingly. After explicating the “dystopian paradigm” (153) through discussing *Corpus Delicti* (2009; *The Method*) by German author Juli Zeh instead of one of the usual suspects, Layh describes various mutations of the dystopian genre, first and foremost “utopia’s secret return in the guise of the critical dystopia” (175). In contrast to the previous chapter, Layh is on less firm ground here since so far, no real consensus has been established when it comes to critical dystopias. The term is used by scholars like Lyman Tower Sargent, Raffaella Baccolini, or Moylan, but there is quite some disagreement regarding what it actually depicts. For Layh, critical dystopias are characterized by a new openness; they “don’t present a hopelessly bad place from which the protagonist can’t escape” (182), but offer glimpses of hope—they retain a utopian impetus. This openness also manifests itself in the formal features of the texts; critical dystopias are characterized “by an open, ambivalent ending” (195). In contrast to the first part, Layh not only analyzes literary examples but also draws on science fiction films like *Alphaville—une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution* (1965), *THX 1138* (1971), or *Brazil* (1985).

All in all, *Finstere neue Welten* is a formidable book that manages to both aptly summarize the existing work done on utopias and dystopias and to considerably widen the scope of research by including various neglected and overlooked texts. Yet, while Layh’s framework and the way she lays it out are very convincing, I have one minor quibble. According to her, the classic—what she calls “canonical”—dystopian novel is characterized by its closed-ness and complete lack of hope. There is simply no way for the protagonist to escape from the dystopian order. Yet, if we closely examine *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which is undoubtedly the prime example of this tradition, things turn out to be less clear-cut. One clue that Big Brother’s rule will not last forever is the Appendix on Newspeak at the end of the book that is written in the past tense. This indicates that it was written in a more distant future, with the regime of Ingsoc overthrown. Additionally, as Gregory Claeys argues in his brand-new book *Dystopia: A Natural History* (2017), Orwell also believed in the resilience of the British working class that in his view would make mass oppression impossible as it occurred under Stalin. So, like More’s *Utopia*, which is not a proper eu-topia, Orwell’s novel is not a canonical dystopia. However, this is primarily a testament to the complexity of these masterpieces and in no way diminishes Layh’s achievement.

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